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SOME METHODS AND PROBLEMS OF THE MODERN OLD TESTAMENT EXEGETES

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In the former article we made a rapid survey of the chief principles which characterized the six periods of exegesis antecedent to our own. We are now ready to consider in a more appreciative frame of mind some of the principles and methods which should be adopted by the up-to-date exegete of our own times.

I. The Textual Criticism

The first problem which meets the modern exegete is the determination of the Hebrew text which must lie at the basis of his interpretation. It is a well-known fact that the best Hebrew text in use today dates from a comparatively recent time. The oldest dated Hebrew manuscript known to scholars is the St. Petersburg codex of 916 A.D. All the principal versions, Septuagint, Vulgate, Syriac, Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus, were translated from the Hebrew text centuries before the date of this manuscript.

Again, it is significant that all known Hebrew manuscripts are in practical agreement; that is, their differences are mainly only such as might have arisen within a few centuries through scribal errors of various kinds. The inference readily follows that there either must have been some radical movement to destroy all manuscripts which differed from the selected standard ones, or else an attempt was made to make all

agree on fundamental points. The former seems to be the more plausible hypothesis.

The next step is to compare this Hebrew text with the best text of the several versions which are valuable to the textual critic. The exegete cannot do more than accept the results of the best textual experts who have devoted years to determining the best readings in the several versions which should be of value in his research. Having adopted a text, say, of the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Syriac, the exegete institutes a comparison between his best Hebrew text and these several versions. While there is usually almost full agreement, the variations between the texts are often so startling that he must conclude that they are not such as could be ascribed merely to the errors of copyists. The versions sometimes contain a word or a passage not found at all in the Hebrew text, and the Hebrew text occasionally has items not found in the versions.

Now the problem of the exegete is, after comparison and the application of certain established rules of textual criticism, so to reconstruct, if necessary, the Hebrew text as to make it, in his judgment, as near as possible to the original Hebrew text. The simplest principles for use at this stage are those advocated and employed by Westcott and Hort (*New Testament in Original Greek*, p. 22):

"(1) That reading which seems to lie at the basis of all the variations and incorporates the best that is in them will be preferred; (2) the most difficult reading is more likely to be correct from the natural tendency of the scribe to make his text as easy and intelligible as possible, and the natural process of simplification in transmission; (3) the reading most in accordance with the context and especially with the style and the usage of the author and his times, is to be preferred. This is the principle of consistency and intrinsic probability." While this process is being worked out the exegete has kept in mind and applied certain well-known laws of transmission, such as those that account for errors of copyists, of hearing and seeing, of letters similar in form and sound, repetition of words, omission of words in passing from line to line, and many other errors which any of us make when we try to copy a few pages verbatim. Other critics would advocate other principles by which our text could be determined.

Having determined upon the text to be adopted, the exegete plunges into the interpretation. He must keep in mind for himself and still more for his hearers and readers that he is dealing with an ancient tongue, which was spoken and written by a people whose intellectual horizon was limited to a small section of Southwestern Asia. Their vocabulary embraced only about 6,000 words and 1,800 roots as compared with Greek with its 80,000+ words. The vocabulary was so limited that we can scarcely understand how it could be sufficient to express the ideas which the Old Testament conveys to us in its history, prophecy, poetry, and laws.

The lack of proper tenses, expressed by different forms, so essential in the classic tongues, gives the Hebrew an elasticity that is quite lacking in any language outside the Semitic field. Then the words in Hebrew in their primitive meanings are practically a series of pictures, so vivid and striking that they can be appreciated only by those who know the language. The exegete, then, in transferring these pictures into the English language must often use a clumsy paraphrase, for the beauties of the figure are not immediately translatable into any foreign tongue. The finesse of the language cannot be seen or appreciated except by a person who has so acquired a knowledge of it as to feel the richness of its thought and the beauty of its expression.

The exegete must not now sit down and in cold blood dissect and interpret any text which he has decided to be the best. There is another element that can never be disregarded in his work. In any kind of literature except straight history, laws, and proverbs—which may be handled as a student handles a stiff in a dissecting room—he must regard the living speaker or writer whose pulse throbs through the words. In reading any prophetic discourses, psalms, addresses, narratives of thrilling events, the exegete must be conscious of a kind of silence that shines through the text. In the 2,500 or more years' distance from the speaker we have lost some of the most effective elements of the original discourse.

Where is the sound of the speaker's voice? Was it harsh, soft, or musical? Where are the gestures in which the Oriental delights to enforce his speech?

What was the glance of the eye as he rebuked the wayward people, or pleaded for them to return to their God? What facial expression did he employ to win or to warn his hearers? These human throbs have all passed irrevocably into oblivion. Still, these vanished elements are today the very things that give life, vivacity, and a throbbing interest to anything that is said or written. But in the Old Testament we are left to our imaginations to picture the most living characteristics of its most human documents.

Now that his preparations have been made, the exegete has two specific things to do: to determine from the text (1) what was in the author's mind when he spoke it, and (2) what impression he intended to convey to the hearers of his day.

Both tasks carry with them not simply the verse which he is intending to interpret, but the entire section of the narrative which seems to deal with one theme. He must consider not simply the grammatical and syntactical relations of words, but the logical or rhetorical thought-relations of this verse to the others, and to the entire narrative or book. Such a process necessitates a careful analysis of the writer's thought from the point of view of an oriental mind, and not of the more logical and less picturesque occidental mind.

This analysis, too, should present in good form the teachings which the narrative wishes to enforce upon the people for whom the speaker or writer spoke or wrote. Then the exegete should separate the purely ancient and temporal elements from the permanent and fixed elements of truth that are good

for all time. He should be able to show us how the moral and religious qualities of the text interpreted have value for our day and generation and thus make his work a living thing in this far-off time and age.

2. The Historical Criticism

When the exegete shall have been successful in determining his Hebrew text, and in interpreting it on the best principles of exegesis known to the modern exegete, he can turn his attention to the larger and more complicated problems of historical criticism. In passing from the realm of the textual to the historical areas he is rising from the foundation to the superstructure of his work, wherein he must determine many-sided and far-reaching issues regarding the document upon which such close work had first to be done.

These so-called historical problems are presented in different orders and in different combinations. Whatever their consecution, the exegete cannot afford to leave out any of the vital issues whose omission would vitiate the final result of his processes.

In the initial stage of his work he assumes that he has before him a human document written in a human language by fallible human hands; that it was written for human understanding, and hence intended to convey some specific idea or ideas. He has no right to assume for it as a written document any supernatural origin, or infallible transmission from age to age. He has no choice as to its human origin and human meaning.

Historical criticism applies to every document the so-called historical test.

Does the evidence gathered from the writing itself, from hints, references, and direct statements, substantiate its claim to a certain historical position? Do the clues given in quotations from this document confirm its claim to that position? Do references to it from other documents tend to settle the question? If so, the next problem to be determined is the historical background. Do the author's statements reveal in its literary form the background upon which the writer could paint the political and religious features of his day? Are the movements of the age otherwise well enough known to assure us that we have the proper canvas upon which the author sketches his scenes? The age of the writing is so worked into the historical background, that the one almost involves the other. If the authorship is of any significance, we now search about for an author in an age where his activity would count for the most in the historical criticism of the whole. If the document were composed at an age subsequent to the events narrated, the evidences therefor must be pointed out.

Closely related to the age of composition is the occasion of the book in hand, which stirred up the speaker to utterance. What was the historical, political or religious motive, either or all, in the speaker's mind that led him to speak or write the narrative under consideration? Our knowledge of any ancient period is fragmentary and scrappy at best, with chasms and ravines that must be bridged by conjectures of self-evident value to the reader. We can paint no perfect picture of any past age, either of the

political or of the religious agitations of the day, which we can use with certainty as the background of the activity of any poet, prophet, or historian.

The next question that plies for a solution is the authenticity of the document in hand. Is the author's name given, or is it anonymous? Could it have been written by another than the one whose name is mentioned? Or is it a compilation of some later editor? Though these questions are usually applied to any human document in ordinary literature, the use of them in Scripture is not only appropriate but necessary if we are to proceed in an orderly manner to solve our questions. Right here we are met with battalions of foes to our questions who maintain that tradition must be given the deciding vote in fixing the authenticity of any Old Testament document. At this the exegete must demur, for there is scarcely a book of the Old Testament to which tradition has not ascribed one or more authors. If we question the traditional authorship which the centuries have attached to a certain book, we do not, therefore, in any sense question its authenticity, which has to do with what the writing claims for itself. The superscriptions of books, of psalms, are therefore under suspicion until the origin of such superscription can be determined. Did the author put it there? Or was it the work of some late editor or compiler? If the claims of the writing itself seem to be reliable and credible, and can stand all the tests ordinarily applied to such literary products, we may affirm that our document is authentic.

Another question that looms large in the mind of the exegete is the integrity of the document. Is the writing a unit or is it composed of several pieces by the same author, or is it a collection of different authors? Is this the original document, or has it been changed or interpolated or modified to meet a later editor's ideas, or the requirements of a later age? Can the glosses be distinguished from the original material? There are few writings in the Old Testament which are a unit. There are many which are interpolated and modified in such a way as to jeopardize their integrity. Few prophetic books can lay just claim to be the product of a single author, and yet these are not entirely free from interpolations. But the credibility of a document does not depend entirely on its integrity. The interpolations and additions may be just as true as the original text, but their statements may be simply of less weight because of their later origin. This being a question purely of literary integrity, it cannot affect our view of its canonical integrity.

It is admitted on all hands that there are errors in Holy Writ—errors of scribes, errors of history, errors of science, errors in the present texts, and errors of literature. Whether there were such in the original autographs will never be known, and any discussion about it will be absolutely futile. But we are sure that such errors exist today, and in no small number. But do these mistakes and errors nullify or destroy the credibility of the Old Testament? There is no claim to infallibility for any of its statements, and no attempt to shield it from the same charges that

may be brought against a literary document of any past age. Its credibility must be put to the same test as any other piece of writing. Its aim is essentially religious and moral, and the tests to be applied must pertain to that realm. All other hints, statements, and references are of minor value, and must be so rated in our methods of testing them. The credibility of the Old Testament documents must be weighed in the balances of moral and religious values, if we are to find out their true status.

Another problem that confronts us today is the ever-growing and expanding field of archaeology. At no distant day the archaeology of the Old Testament will assume a new and increased importance in deciding the age of the books. The multiplied results of excavation and decipherment of ancient documents have given a new and far clearer meaning to many hitherto obscure hints regarding the manners and customs of the ancient Semitic peoples. The marvelous discoveries in these lines alone show how commentaries must be rewritten from age to age. If Bret Harte's works, written in California fifty years ago, must be supplied with copious footnotes to explain customs current at that date, but now practically extinct in those regions, how much more must be required of the Old Testament exegete who would undertake to make plain the everyday customs of the Israelite in Palestine three thousand years ago. The customs and manners of the nearer Orient today are almost wholly foreign even to the modern tourist, whose blunders have often proved embarrassing if not entirely dis-

concerting to him in all his dealings with the natives. Everyday customs and manners varied from age to age, slightly perhaps, but enough so that with careful discrimination we can sometimes locate a particular writing. Now the prevalence of certain *mores* in any document may with other things aid in locating it in time, and in giving it a color that is unmistakable in our sum-total of determinations.

The last and most important in the test of historical criticism which must be applied to the document in hand is the literary style. This may be used narrowly or broadly. One no sooner begins his study of Hebrew literature than he discovers peculiarities of the Semitic mind. These must be regarded in any estimate set upon a piece of writing. As an example, the Hebrew usually states the results of an action, then proceeds to state the causes which produced them. For example, Genesis, chap. 10, describes the distribution of the races upon the face of the known world. Then, as if asking himself how this came about, the writer recites in chap. 11 the story of the tower of Babel, and how it became the immediate cause of the Dispersion already given in chap. 10.

Again, the mind of the Old Testament Semite was not philosophical, but practical. However much we Occidentals do to uncover the philosophy of the Hebrew mind, we shall be about as successful as that German professor who seemed to think that he found among the ancient Hebrews sufficient phenomena to write a book on the "Psychology of the Old Testament." The wisdom of the sages in Proverbs mainly is made

up of practical, everyday maxims, with no pretense at any philosophy of life or conduct. While it is true that we can discover his real philosophy of living, we are not warranted in attributing to him any formulation of that kind.

The style of the literature often furnishes us the key to the general thought that is imbedded in it. If we deal with history we find a somewhat mechanical, set form of narration that has little elasticity. In fact, some of the records, particularly in Kings, read as if the writer had used a fixed blank in which he had filled up the vacancies with names, dates, and results.

Then the more elastic and picturesque style of the prophets gives the exegete an elaborate playground for the display of his genius. The prophet was the freeman of the times. He used larger license than the poet and often roamed through the entire ranges of literary style. He turned from prose to poetry and vice versa with an ease and effect that stagger writers of today. So impassionate was he in the utterance of his messages that we forget his sudden turn from one style to another. His words burn with passion and his figures of speech sparkle with gems of oriental beauty.

The exegete must remember that the prophet's activity was most startling when crises or threatened crises were menacing Israel. At this time this man of God showed that his chief interest in his people was not political or national, but religious and moral. It was his task often to tear off the political mask, and expose to the view of the populace the real moral issue that it had covered. Though that issue was well known to his

contemporaries, it is too often obscure, indefinite, and even conjectural to us in these days. The exegete must use every means at his disposal to find out the real moral issue that opened the prophets' mouth, and called forth such words of warning, admonition, and threat. Also beneath the political issue the prophet must determine in his own mind the motive that precipitated the crisis which he is trying to meet. The exegete must weigh the threatening utterances of the prophet, distinguish his flashes of genius, and discover the real pith of his message, as intended for the men of his day. Only a comprehension of the conditions which he tried to meet, of the character of the persons involved in those conditions, and of the drastic methods necessary to stem the tide of national defection, can aid us in interpreting the full significance of his many-sided and sublime discourses.

Another feature of the prophetic writings cannot be overlooked. The prophet sketched for his people ideals that were projected far into the future. His first and fundamental task was to be the ethical and religious teacher of his times. He painted these ideals on the imperfect and often badly creased and crooked canvases of his day; and they were often so intermingled with his sermons as to present difficulties of a peculiar kind to the interpreter of the whole body of discourses.

When we have passed on narrative and prophetic literature, one more kind remains, viz., poetry. Hebrew and Semitic poetry is *sui generis*. It does not consist of either rhyme or rhythm in form, although many attempts have been made to establish the existence of

rhythm. Its prevailing characteristic is parallelism of thought, more or less complete. That is, two successive lines are either synonymous or antithetic in thought. An example of synonymous lines are these:

Show me thy ways, O Jehovah;
Teach me thy paths [Ps. 25:4].

An example of antithetic parallelism is:

A good man shall obtain favor of Jehovah;
But a man of wicked devices will he condemn [Prov. 12:2].

A third kind of parallelism is designated synthetic, that is, the second member adds to, and rounds out the thought of, the first; this can be termed parallelism, however, only by a figure of speech. This is an example:

Be thou exalted, O Jehovah, in thy strength:
So will we sing and praise thy power
[Ps. 21:13].

There are also several other less used kinds of parallels. But the principal item to be noted in poetry is that thought parallel is the axis upon which everything revolves. The kind of poetry, the natural or artificial character of the verse, the thought, and the language itself, are fundamental in determining the age and the classification of any document.

It must now be evident that the second great problem of the exegete in taking up any Old Testament document is to determine by the aid of the principles of historical criticism a list of fundamental matters regarding that document. Of these mention has been made of the historical background, occa-

sion, age, authorship, authenticity, integrity, credibility, archaeology, and style. These need not be canvassed in any cast-iron order, but in such succession as seems best to ascertain the facts for the particular document in hand.

In this rapid survey of the theme, only the chief principles, problems, and methods of the Old Testament exegete of the modern period could receive mention. The history of this science is replete with lessons of warning, with appeals to a broader view of the province of exegesis, and with aids toward eliminating from our field matters quite foreign to our problems, yet intrenched

within the area of our study, as a result of blunders of the past.

Our modern period has quite swept aside most of the excrescences of early periods and put to actual service those principles which have perpetual value. The established principles of historical criticism when rigidly enforced perform an invaluable task for the Old Testament exegete. As soon as he is sure of the general character of his document, he calls to his colors all the results of historical, archaeological, literary, and linguistic research, to win for us and for our times the truest and best thought imbedded in the picturesque language of the Old Testament.

WHAT ARE THE CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALS?

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We have published a number of articles dealing with the general topic that Dr. Strayer treats. The present contribution to this important matter comes from the point of view of a working pastor profoundly interested in the application of the principles of Christianity in our modern world. For the sake of interest this article might be compared with that of Rev. Philip Van Zandt in the December, 1915, "Biblical World."

It is singular that anyone should feel resentment at the phrase "Back to the Fundamentals." No creative mind, however independent, can afford to ignore the groundwork of things. In the interest of real progress in religion and morals we must not depart from what is basal and essential. But some do mildly resent the phrase, because to

those who shout it most loudly and persistently it seems to have an ecclesiastical horizon and to point only to certain dogmas and practices which the church in the past has held to be indispensable. These more progressive minds decline to limit the faith and practice of today by the faith and practice of any yesterday.